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Educational styles, peers' approval and adolescent self-injurious behaviours

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Abstract

The present research aims at understanding how the same body may become object of aggression and destruction by adolescents' self-injurious behaviours. Particularly, self-injurious behaviours are those finalised to destruction or deliberate alteration of one's body, even if without a conscious suicidal intention. The research aims at studying the relationship between educational styles, self-injurious behaviours and the social representation of the phenomenon in a group of adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years. Research has shown that on the basis of self-injurious behaviours there are the perception of an authoritarian educational style and approval by peers and brothers.

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1. Introduction: the fear of being invisible

The body has a fundamental role in developing one's own adult personality because it represents the expression of the individual's psycho-physical identity. The present research study aims at understanding how the same body may become object of aggression and destruction by adolescents' self-injurious behaviours.

It is well known in literature (Lo Baidò, 2001; Palmonari, 1993; Petter, 1990) that building one's identity is not an easy and coherent process. On the contrary, it is a process characterized by contradiction and difficulties linked to the bodily changes taking place from puberty to adolescence. In this period the body is loved and hated at the same time, on one side it enables the adolescent of being together and communicating with others, on the other it marks

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the boundary, the barrier separating the self from others. The body becomes like a membrane which if on one side isolates the inside and outside world, on the other it holds them together.

In this transitional phase the bodily dimension becomes central and with it a whole series of behaviours (such as tattooing one self, piercing and cutting) may represent an area of risk behaviours. Marking one's body is in fact a painful experience through which the adolescent challenges one's endurance of suffering, to understand the power of endurance of this new body and how far it can go; it is also a sort of challenge to one's parents and childish body from which the adolescent tries with difficulty to escape from.

The wound is therefore a visible proof of one's existence (Le Breton, 2005), the scar represents the desired union between past and present, the wounded body is worth of care and attention (Lavanco, Novara, 2005).

2. The self-injurious behaviours

The body changes for aesthetic purposes, are the oldest and most spontaneous expression of human creativity. In the last decade, some of these changes have become perverse and antisocial. Particularly, self-injurious behaviours are those finalised to destruction or deliberate alteration of one's body, which even if without a conscious suicidal intention, produce serious lesions so as to be evident (Favazza, 1988).

The population of subjects injuring themselves is rather various, since the invisibility of the phenomenon and relative prejudices make difficult to estimate their number. In fact they mix with the "normal" population, that is individuals without a specific psychological profile.

Self-injurious behaviours (SIB) include (Sarno, 2008):

- heavy self-mutilation, which causes serious permanent defacement (castration, amputation of a limb, etc.). This self-mutilations belong to psychotic categories;
- superficial self-mutilation that covers any act aimed at injuring oneself (cuts, burns, fractures, scarifying one's wounds, interfering with their healing etc.);
- latent self-mutilation acts, as smoking, taking drugs, undergoing exhausting physical exercises. It is the most common and subtle phenomenon.

Among the above mentioned categories, the superficial self-mutilation usually starts during adolescents.

The motivation behind such behaviours has a very different meaning nowadays from the one of some tribal cultures (Camphausen, 1997; Van Gennep, 1981). In those cases, in fact, such behaviours expressed the desire of freedom and acknowledgement of one's oneness but also passage-rites, therefore a way to stay within the rules and traditions marking the person as a member of a community or at its margins. Some of these motivations are also common among adolescents, but most of the times they hide less conscious meanings such as:

- strengthening one's frail self
- embodying one's self turning affectivities and emotions on one's body
- dealing with a body which is changing against one's will and which is perceived "out side one's psycho", an object on which you can project aggressiveness and conflicts.

Together with these introspective motivations there are others such as the need of belonging to a group of teenagers and sharing their values, ideals and fashions. Fashion doesn't only address the teenagers' aesthetic choices (such as piercing and body art) but offers criteria to measure their groupship. Fashion and groupship therefore take the place of the ideal of the Self, when the personality is still frail (Pietropolli Charmet, Marazzan, 2000). For this reason, the peer role may affect the choice of self-injurious behaviours, which should be further investigated.

In most cases, the body is manipulated, despite the disapproval of parents. This happens to shirk their internalized prohibitions and inhibitions and to affirm the separation from them and their childish images. For this reason, the self-injurious behaviours are related with parents' educational style.

Educational styles reflect a specific way of taking care, which is the result of fusion among family history, cultural determinants and social values, but find their fulcrum in the exercise of parent's discipline toward their son or daughter.

Hoffman (1983) defines parents' educational styles of parents through two disciplines: one focused on either physical or mental coercion (power assertion), characterized by the use of punishment or threat of it, the other based on persuasion, or rational or emotional (induction), then on persuasive dialogue that brings out the motivation for their actions. An adequate educational style allows the adolescent to develop his or her autonomy, to increase self-esteem, to tolerate frustration, and to develop satisfying social relationships. On the contrary, an authoritarian or

permissive educational style tends to create an emotional tension, inability to understand the true meaning that the teacher wants to convey, confusion and insecurity.

3. Purpose of study

The research aims at studying the relationship between educational styles, self-injurious behaviours and the social representation of the phenomenon in a group of adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years.

The specific goals of the research were:

- Inquiring the effect of perceived educational styles on self injurious behaviour
- Inquiring the effect of the phenomenon as it is perceived by parents, brothers, peers.
- Finding the factors which are latent in self-injurious behaviour.

4. Methods

A convenience sample, consisting of 1100 Italian adolescents of which 46.9% male and 53.1% female, was distinguished into five age groups: 15 (36.6%); 16 (24.8%); 17 (19%); 18 (13.1%); 19 (6.5%). Overall, there are 44.6% coming from high schools and 55.4% from comprehensive schools.

The research protocol includes: the Scale of Parents' Perception of Educational Styles (Perris, Jacobson, Lindstrom, Von Knorring and Perris, 1980), the Perception Scale of self-injurious behaviours in social groups, which was developed for this purpose; the Scale measuring self-injurious behaviour and Personal Desirability of the same, which made it possible to divide the sample into 3 subgroups: individuals refusing self-injurious behaviour (24.5%), subjects who have chosen limited body manipulations (56.8%), persons who have made various and numerous choices for handling the body (18.6%).

5. Findings

After a variance analysis it was remarked that according to the different educational styles practiced by parents, there is a difference between the selected groups. In fact those who have chosen to manipulate their body have higher average values for the following dimensions: over-protection, punishment, pressure, rejection and disapproval from the parental figure, the same, however, had a lower average in comparison with the other two groups in the "support" dimension.

Table 1. Scale scores average on parents' perception of educational style

| | Refusing SIB | Limited SIB | Numerous SIB |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Over protection | 27.81 | 27.75 | 28.83 |
| Support | 81.37 | 79.76 | 76.29 |
| Punishment | 23.21 | 23.41 | 26.03 |
| Pressure | 32.70 | 33.09 | 34.40 |
| Rejection | 23.08 | 23.29 | 24.52 |
| Disapproval | 27.12 | 28.36 | 31.23 |

Table 2. Differentiating functions and correlations

| | selfvalue | explicit corr. | Corr. | Lambda di Wilks | c2 | gl | p |
|------------|-----------|----------------|-------|-----------------|--------|----|-------|
| Function 1 | 0.049 | 89% | 0.217 | 0.947 | 59.485 | 12 | <.001 |
| Function 2 | 0.006 | 11% | 0.078 | 0.994 | 6.707 | 5 | <.001 |

| | Function 1 | Function 2 |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Over protection | 0.271 | 0.363 |

| | | |
|-------------|--------|--------|
| Support | -0.547 | 0.041 |
| Punishment | 0.661 | 0.580 |
| Pressure | 0.431 | 0.120 |
| Rejection | 0.916 | 0.380 |
| Disapproval | 0.113 | -0.015 |

With regard to the Perception of self-injurious behaviours in social groups, the group of subjects who practiced widely in their body handling obtains the highest average scores in all factors of scale, with particular reference to the approval by peers and brothers.

Table 3. Scale scores average on perception of self-injurious behaviours in social groups

| | Refusing SIB | Limited SIB | Numerous SIB |
|---------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Approval by father | 20.38 | 24.15 | 29.58 |
| Approval by mother | 14.45 | 16.76 | 19.81 |
| Approval by brothers or sisters | 10.93 | 16.51 | 24.10 |
| Approval by peers | 32.11 | 38.76 | 50.29 |

Table 4 - Differentiating functions and correlations

| | selfvalue | explicit corr. | Corr. | Lambda di Wilks | c2 | gl | p |
|------------|-----------|----------------|-------|-----------------|---------|----|-------|
| Function 1 | 0.244 | 99.7% | 0.443 | 0.803 | 239.805 | 8 | <.001 |
| Function 2 | 0.001 | 0.3% | 0.025 | 0.999 | 0.698 | 3 | <.01 |

| | Function 1 | Function 2 |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Approval by father | 0.184 | 0.255 |
| Approval by mother | 0.287 | 0.043 |
| Approval by brothers or sisters | 0.648 | 0.618 |
| Approval by peers | 0.783 | -0.603 |

Through the factors' analysis two factors came out of which the former is explained by scales relative to punishment, rejection, pressure and lack of support. Therefore, it seems that on the basis of self-injurious behaviours there is the perception of an educational style which is characterized by punishments, rejecting and oppressive attitudes and by the lack of support.

Besides, as to the perception that the interviewed adolescent has of what his social group thinks about the SIB, there is a factor explained both by the scale relative to his or her brothers' and peers' approval. This shows that the peers' approval is of considerable importance for the adolescent.

6. Implications

The survey confirms the need for interventions designed to build parenting skills and interventions that enhance the protective behaviour of peers' groups.

In fact, the educational style is a fundamental factor which is at the basis of both risky behaviours and adolescents' coping behaviours. At the same time, the role of teenagers' social representations of risky behaviours and body manipulation is essential. Therefore, the feeling of peers' approval is much superior to the parents' disapproval of such behaviours. The relations with other teen-agers in fact enable adolescents to find support about to their personal problems and to give a meaning to their own experiences, through sharing activities and emotions.

But we mustn't forget that parents' educational styles have deeper and remoter roots in the subject's personal story.

The process of identification, typical of adolescence, can be expressed in "extreme ways" (such as self-injurious behaviours) if the parents' educational style was characterized by over protection, punishment, pressure, rejecting, disapproval and nearly lack of support.

The results of the present research reinforce the idea of an intervention to promote the adolescents' welfare, through a support to parents and above all their training stimulating knowledge, mutual confrontation and the continuous research of their educational and parental styles.

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